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Book Reviews

Peter Stitt

*Liars and Truth-Tellers, Fancy and Plain**

I

The most recent plain-style revolution in American poetry coincided roughly with this country's participation in the Vietnam War. It would seem that the distrust Americans felt then for political rhetoric fostered a similar distrust for traditional poetic devices, most of which are rhetorical in nature. The plain style, which eschews rhyme, meter, and many other aesthetic elements, has always been associated with innocence and sincerity; thus it became the method of choice for writers concerned with telling the truth and nothing but the truth. Even some writers committed to fabrication were swept up by the fashion. Then, starting somewhere in the mid- or late-seventies, poets of this latter stripe began to show signs of being bored with the plain style; suddenly sestinas were everywhere, along with complicated figures of speech and nonsequential patterns of organization. Style is more important than content to such writers; they want to speak with flash, and often jettison literal truth in the process.

Meanwhile, a great many other poets still retain their commitment to the plain style and its appropriateness to telling the truth about everyday things. For such writers, content is clearly more important than style, and flash is what they least wish to be found guilty of. The distinction I am making between content and style is suggested by William Matthews in his poem "By Heart"—one of several in *Foreseeable Futures* that comment on his practice of the art of poetry. Here Matthews asks:

* An essay-review of

PERENNIALS. By Judith Kitchen. Tallahassee: Anhinga Press, 1986. iv, 64 pp. \$14.95. \$6.95, paper.

THE BOAT OF QUIET HOURS. By Jane Kenyon. St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 1986. vi, 85 pp. \$8.00, paper.

RED ROADS. By Charlie Smith. New York: Dutton, 1987. xii, 68 pp. \$13.95. \$7.95, paper.

FORESEEABLE FUTURES. By William Matthews. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. xiv, 50 pp. \$13.95. \$8.95, paper.

FORAGING. By David Young. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1986. viii, 49 pp. \$17.00. \$8.95, paper.

THE GOLD CELL. By Sharon Olds. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987. x, 91 pp. \$14.95.

Which came first, style or content? To this trick
question Drs. Xtl and Yrf and Professor Zyzgg
have given honorable gray hours. Style is that rind

of the soul we can persuade to die with us—
no wonder we call it a body of work. Suppose
style is the man or woman, the crumbling reams

of shale, the mango, the brine shrimp, the world
as it is. Is content then what the world isn't?
I don't think so. Content is what style's failed.

Matthews uses style to transform the logical content of these lines, and that of course is the point. To complete his last sentence, we might say that content is the everyday details that style has failed to assimilate into the finished poem; it is the raw material that remains untouched by the process of artifice.

In a poem called "Liar," Charlie Smith—who is similarly committed to style—carries this process a step further. He claims to lie all the time, as a matter of principle:

I want you to know
that my life is a ritual lie
and that I deserve to be loved
anyway. I want you to smile
when I tell of the purple hyacinths
caught in the gears of the raised bridge
over the Chickopee River, I want you to pretend
you were there.

Earlier in the poem, speaking of an accidental killing committed by his brother, Smith says, "I can tell you that this isn't true." There is always the possibility, when one is dealing with congenital liars, that the actual lie is the statement, "I am telling a lie," and not the story said to be a lie. Whether that is the case here or not, it is a fact that, for Charlie Smith, lying is an essential part of poetry. He is more interested in a stylish, narrative swagger, his own particular kind of flash, than in simply telling the truth.

As for Matthews, he is as desperate a liar as Smith. Elsewhere in his volume we will see him commenting on the deviousness of poets, how their way with words allows them to say anything, without regard for everyday truth. He even has a poem that speaks, with the greatest apparent sincerity, of the importance of content in poetry. Clearly, we are dealing with a pair of slick and accomplished con men in Smith and Matthews. At the other extreme from them we have two accomplished plain stylists, Judith Kitchen and Jane Kenyon, both of whom strive to be accurate and uncomplicated. Finally, it would appear that both David Young and Sharon Olds, in quite different ways, wish to combine these modes. Young is by turns fancy and plain, though never in the same poem, while Olds achieves, through the startling clarity of her almost plain voice, a realism so heightened as to seem embellished.

For now, however, I would like to begin with Judith Kitchen, whose *Perennials* is the winner of the 1985 Anhinga Prize for Poetry, judged by

Hayden Carruth. Thematically, Kitchen is concerned in these poems with the idea of the fall, a person's loss of innocence (that's the bad news) and assumption of knowledge (which might be the good news, did it not involve so much losing). She takes her epigraph from James Wright, who counsels that "Any creature would be a fool to take the sun lightly, / The indifferent god of brief life, the / Small mercy." Light is the wished-for blessing here, the light of understanding and knowledge, but how seldom it is reached within a fallen world. Indicating the paired qualities of striving and failure, Kitchen asks, at the end of an elegy addressed to her mother: "What if we'd said all we wanted / to say? Would we have learned how / to live in intermittent light?" Intermittent light seems the most one can wish for, in a world of personal fall.

The fall is everywhere in this book, and takes three general forms. One, the most generic, is the fall everyone experiences who lives into adolescence, the loss of childhood light. The first poem in this book, "Before," portrays a girl "walking Spencer Hill," looking for wild blueberries. "This is not / her father's garden with its careful rows," the author points out, but a first step into the postlapsarian world of chaos—even though, for the girl, "The sun" still "walks a straight line / between the hills." The poem ends with a clear indication of the epiphany to come: "This, she thinks, is where the engineer goes / after he has waved. Her body, / with no premonition of sadness, turns / and turns in the blinding sun."

The other two aspects of the fall are only slightly more specific to the speaker of these poems; they are, first, the disintegration of love and the breakup of a family, and, second, the fact of death, exemplified here by that of the speaker's mother. "Winter Landscape" takes account of both of these griefs as it tries to make peace with diminishment:

Beyond the rail fence, horses
stand nose to the wind. They might
as well be statues. Everywhere,

everywhere we look, trees weld earth
to a flat white sky. The car
moves between these walls of white,

accepting the vagaries of wind,
drifts that swirl in to catch us up
in moments of forgetfulness.

Let us believe the impossible. Let us
slide between two griefs so easily
they seem remote as history. This

is the meaning of white—a day
so cold, so undemanding, that the
heart itself lies briefly still.

In her best poems, Kitchen takes a single image or a closely related group of images and manipulates it to express her meaning. Here the color white is

used; it seems as much of light as the grown person can endure, the cold, numbing white of cloudy winter.

There are many such poems in this volume—quiet, economical, and uncomplicated, they gradually surround objects or settings with emotional significance. Other notable examples are “Catching the Moles,” in which one of these animals “pops into daylight, // blind velvet”; “Lying on the Bed”; “Driving into Fog,” in which there is a road “rolling up / out of nowhere, erasing itself / in the mirror”; “Spring Puddle”; and “Solstice,” in which we learn “how / to walk in snow—toes first for the downhill, / heel in where the going’s harder.” Sometimes when she tries for more complicated structures, however, Kitchen seems to lose both clarity and control. The laudably ambitious title poem here, for example, ties itself in knots trying to deal with too many ideas, too many images; its ending, “Why do I need to make sense of it?” sounds like an implicit admission of failure. Happily, such lapses are infrequent; most of the time Judith Kitchen succeeds brilliantly at her singular, crystalline business.

It is striking how similar Jane Kenyon and Judith Kitchen are as poets. Both value things, images, above other elements of poetry; in one of her poems, Kitchen asks, “What can we know beyond sensation?” then proceeds to center every poem on a sensually observed object. Kenyon seems to agree; a passage in her book, *The Boat of Quiet Hours*, enunciates beautifully the central thematic concern of Kitchen’s book: “Things: simply lasting, then / failing to last: water, a blue heron’s / eye, and the light passing / between them: into light all things / must fall, glad at last to have fallen.” As these lines reveal, however, there is an important difference in the way the two writers approach the basic notion of the fall. For Kitchen, it leads inevitably to diminishment; for Kenyon it results ultimately in seasoned joy.

Despite that resolution, which emerges toward the end of this volume, most of Kenyon’s poems are cast in somber, though beautiful, tones. “Rain in January” is typical of the quiet and pointed brooding we find so often here:

I woke before dawn, still
in a body. Water ran
down every window, and rushed
from the eaves.

Beneath the empty feeder
a skunk was prowling for suet
or seed. The lamps flickered off
and then came on again.

Smoke from the chimney
could not rise. It came down
into the yard, and brooded there
on the unlikelihood of reaching
heaven. When my arm slipped
from the arm of the chair
I let it hang beside me, pale,
useless, and strange.

All things in the poem fall towards earth, and nothing has the power to raise them up again: the ennui of midwinter, midlife. The last section of the book, however, contains a series of love poems that provides one aspect of the joy Kenyon ultimately finds. The other, and more important, aspect arrives through an indigenous religious faith, the presence of "the third person / in the Trinity," the one that has mostly "evaded us" but appears as speaker in "Briefly It Enters, and Briefly Speaks": "I am the one whose love / overcomes you, already with you / when you think to call my name . . ."

Because of their imagistic plain style, these are generally deceptive poems; a lot more is going on in them than at first appears. "Deer Season" is typical, a poem that evokes autumn in New Hampshire, with its hills, trees, farms, animals, and hunters, all observed by the speaker as she travels home:

November, late afternoon. I'm driving fast,
only the parking lights on.
A minor infringement of the law . . .

All along Route 4 men wearing orange
step out of the woods after a day
of hunting, their rifles pointed
toward the ground.

The sky turns red, then
purple in the west, and the luminous
birches lean over the narrow macadam road.

I cross the little bridge
near the pool called The Pork Barrel,
where the best fishing is,
and pass the Fentons' farm—the windows
of the milking parlor bright, the great
silver cooling tank beginning to chill the milk.

I've seen the veal calves drink from pails
in their stalls. Suppose even the ear of wheat
suffers in the mill . . .
Moving fast in my car at dusk
I plan our evening meal.

The scene is so pretty and so lovingly presented that a hasty reader could easily miss the murderousness and self-criticism that motivate the poem. Varieties of slaughter are everywhere present—the hunted deer, the fishing hole, the veal calves, the suffering wheat (so odd a notion as to tip us off to the subtext), the speaker's thoughts of dinner. A first answer to all this tension might be found in the presence of the hunters. A deeper answer lies in the speaker's scarcely concealed desire to run them down; as she speeds through the dark in an inadequately lighted car, they stumble dangerously out of the woods on both sides of a narrow and sharply curved road. That she is aware of her murderous thoughts is clear from the poem's final line.

As might be expected of a writer who works so plainly, Kenyon occasionally gives in to an excessive literalism, saying things too much as they

are with little attempt at artistry. Even then, however, she seems to serve her ends, one of which is to portray the starkness of this country way of life. Here, for example, is the entirety of "The Sandy Hole":

The infant's coffin no bigger than a flightbag . . .
The young father steps backward from the sandy hole,
eyes wide and dry, his hand over his mouth.
No one dares to come near him, even to touch his sleeve.

It is often the case that poets have an easier time writing about troubling things than about love, and so it is with Jane Kenyon. The love poems in this book are its least successful ones, sometimes veering towards the maudlin and sentimental. For most of its length, however, *The Boat of Quiet Hours* is a subtly complex, quietly beautiful book.

II

Despite what William Matthews says in one of the passages quoted at the beginning of this essay, the poets I am calling liars do not avoid or despise content in their poems. To the contrary, they are likely to have so deep a commitment to meaning that they are willing to lie about details in order to reach a more profound end. It would also appear that style *is* meaning for these writers, to a much greater extent than is the case with the plainer writers discussed above.

Red Roads is a first book of poems by Charlie Smith, who has previously published one novel. Though contemporary, and therefore ironic, he aspires to wisdom in his poems and covets a Delphic stance: "In eastern Iowa I stood / in the cornfields remembering when all the grass was wild, / wishing I was one of the old ones / still so connected to earth I could call / birds down, rain, make a difference / to the wind." In addition to this wish to affect the environment, Smith would also like to change the lives of his readers, even if only briefly: "I think I can say // *let's suppose* . . . and then place / in your open hand the silver fraction / of memory and desire that will prove / for fifteen seconds that we live in a world / that is richer / than paradise."

An interesting tension lies beneath the surface of the lines just quoted. Smith's love of memory and desire carries him towards the real, physical world, the rivers, trees, and red clay hills of his native Georgia. His hunger for paradise, for things that might be called down from above, on the other hand, carries him towards the realm of abstraction, where ideas are eternally true. The poems in *Red Roads* constantly reflect this tension; generally grounded in narrative or description, the better ones grow in an almost organic fashion towards wisdom. In the weaker poems, by contrast, Smith plants pithy gems, wise sayings that seem intended to give an instant sense of depth to the action. Unfortunately, that is not always the effect they have, as the following passages prove when extracted and set side by side. In "Red-bird" (a thoroughly chaotic poem), the central character is a father who "knows / we will hold on to almost anything to keep from dying, / to keep

from going crazy"; "He knows / that to save ourselves we will finally admit to anything. . . ." In "Dr. Auchincloss Bids Good-bye to His Wife," the wisdom speaker is anonymous ("someone / is always protesting, nothing, *nothing* / really keeps you from starving"), while in "What Matters Comes Slowly," it is the poet himself who explains: "It takes time to be touched by things, sometimes / it takes time." Finally, in "As Far as Living Things Go," wisdom arrives from the collective voice of humankind as imagined by Charlie Smith: "We wish we could go on loving / forever. We know very little about what life will bring / and only fitfully understand what is past"; "What we know / already . . . is that everything / has a history worth knowing." What makes these passages so wearying is not just the pompous solemnity with which they are presented; it is also because this way of writing has been so fashionable recently among younger American poets (although before reading this book I had thought that fashion was over).

But Charlie Smith is an engaging writer, as he shows in other passages and in many whole poems. Among my favorites in the latter category is the long "North Atlantic," which begins with the speaker looking at the ocean but wanting "to get away, / into the ocean or downriver—downstream—where the maples / droop their branches like willows and sup water with leaves." Why the desire to escape? Because river means youth and home, innocence, easier times. There follows a dreadful stanza about the time "in south Georgia, my best friend and I / came on a shoal of minnows as we rounded a bend / of the Ocklochnee River." Scooping the little critters up with their hands, the pals "laughed for joy / at the small silver beings so harmonious / and undefended." Later they see deer, and then "the thin cats / they call panthers in that part of the country / cried out in a sorrow / so distilled we were afraid to talk about it." That Smith chooses to express the positive pole of his poem in such a precious, sugary way is unfortunate; what respectable poet would ever want to go someplace where they think and talk like that?

The next stanza reminds us of the truth with which we began: Charlie Smith is a liar. One of the things we might know about his brother (the one who did or did not kill a teenager with a four iron) is that he is dead; in this poem, he is reincarnated as a disc jockey:

When my father's house burned down
we stood out in the dewy yard and held
each other as if for the last
time in our lives, as if we were about to abandon each other
for good, which, as it turned out, we were. My brother
left the next morning for Oregon where he plays
classical music on the radio. My sister
married the owner of a bread company and moved to Ohio.
And then my father, who based his life
on the riotous and melodramatic
stories his own father told him about
great men from an age no one remembered,

began to slowly leak away, like air
 from a tire that you tell yourself,
 driving on a sandy road under the cool, shadowy arms of water oaks,
 you must do something about, soon.

These lines have a complicated, postmodern tone, joking and ironic at the same time as they are serious, and are surprisingly different from the sentimentality that precedes them.

After several intervening stanzas about family dispersion, the death of the speaker's mother, and other losses, the poem is brought to this anticlimactic conclusion:

The clouds here
 look knotted, but that is just something
 I want to say about them. The ducks
 have rejoined the flock, which moves farther out,
 passing over shallow patches where the yellow bottom
 shines as if from extra light. The gulls, individual
 and harkening, cry out singly. There is a coldness
 in the sun here, though the light is warm and
 colorless. This cold ocean,
 bird-ridden and plucked about
 by sun and storms,
 is what it is. It is finished
 with rivers.

Because of their radically flattened tone, these lines cast an ironic glance backward upon the speaker's childhood paradise, described above. Here at the end, we are carried once again through the everyday world and into the realm of meaning. The ocean is obviously more than mere ocean in this poem; it represents reality, death, the loss of childhood innocence—several familiar old things, all of which are finally accepted by the speaker.

Again I like Smith's self-conscious tone; he lets us know that he knows he is writing a poem rather than trying to capture the undying truth. In his poems, style influences content rather than the other way around. Smith is a rhetorician in the familiar Southern mode of Dave Smith, Rodney Jones, and James Dickey. Like them, he pumps a lot of gas, as in the completely meaningless lines that bring a blessed end to "Crossing into the Yucatan":

As you slide carelessly in
 beside me I am touched by one of those moments
 when your face is strange and newly beautiful to me,
 and so I take you in my arms,
 corrupt and hopeless, as we all are,
 bared to the sustenance and stain of sunlight,
 to the brazen dissolved burning of petroleum fires,
 to this river where night has hidden its clothes once more,
 to the green perpetual shore of the Yucatan, where just now,
 for no reason we will know, a few birds, white with the long tails of swallows,
 rise grandly, like the mothers of kings,
 and fly slowly away.

All books are uneven and *Red Roads* is no exception; when in doubt, Charlie Smith hops into his style machine and presses its pedal to the floor. His real strength would seem to reside in the more controlled and ironic voice seen occasionally above.

William Matthews has always been a wisdom poet, a teller of special truths, but where he used to enshroud his maxims in a relatively plain style, he seems in recent work to be growing towards something grander, trickier, more challenging and interesting. I have already spoken of the assumptions about style that underlie this book; in "Days Beyond Recall" Matthews writes about content, subject matter, the particular area of wisdom that is his focus here. In response to a quotation from Santayana, in which the philosopher describes himself as "almost a poet," Matthews defines a poet as

a student of the future and thus of the past.
The older our poet grows (nostalgia being
a dotage), the more past he has to love
and powder and dandle, and so he might use up
his dwindling future like a cake of soap,
or he can turn to that future expectantly,
the way a Jesuit might search his mirror for a skull,
and from the mists of waking and shaving
a skull will blandly greet him. Or he can
smolder along the fuse of his ignorance—
almost a poet, almost a future, almost dead.

Matthews' previous book *A Happy Childhood* was devoted to an investigation of the past; as its title and this passage indicate, *Foreseeable Futures* looks in the opposite direction. Among the things he finds there are a sobering sense of his own mortality and an expanded, more cynical degree of self-knowledge.

In "Photo of the Author with a Favorite Pig," Matthews—seemingly eager to understand and explain himself—both confuses and clarifies his own identity:

Behind its snout like a huge button,
like an almost clean plate, the pig
looks candid compared to the author,
and why not? He has a way with words,
but the unspeakable pig, squat
and foursquare as a bathtub,
squints frankly. Nobody knows
the trouble it's seen, this rained-out
pork roast, this ham escaped into
its corpulent jokes, its body of work.
The author is skinny and looks serious:
what will he say next? The copious pig

has every appearance of knowing,
 from his pert, coiled tail to the wispy tips
 of his edible ears, but the pig isn't telling.

What is clever about this poem is how Matthews—through grammatical ambiguity and stylistic legerdemain—intermingles his author's personality with that of the pig. Each becomes the other while remaining himself; ultimately the author is unmasked as a skinny, corpulent, loquacious, mute, stupid, wise, misleading, and straightforward pig. This poet is a trickster, we conclude, not above creating confusion in the name of fact and clarity.

Mortality, the other of Matthews' two central concerns, has an impressive reality in this volume, as though the author were not just talking about other people dying, but has reached that point in life when it becomes possible to look down the dwindling tunnel of time and actually see his own death coming. Until that moment, a person has theories and sad chatter; after that moment there is a dryness in the mouth, "A styptic rain" that "stings grit and soot // from the noon air." Dylan Thomas thought the moment of fatal understanding arrived as soon as someone close to you passed on ("After the first death, there is no other"), but that may not be so. Sometimes it is necessary to suffer from a special death. Perhaps your father died when you were thirty-four, and still you rambled on, slick, shallow, stupid, a skilled prattler; it may not have been until the loss of your troublesome mother—ten, almost eleven, years later—that reality finally opened its jaws beneath your house of cards.

Matthews has organized his book into six informal units of six poems each—a distinction based much more on form than on theme. The first five poems in each group are fifteen lines long, while the sixth poem is always longer, though of no set length. Perhaps the best poem in the book is "Caddies' Day, the Country Club, a Small Town in Ohio," one of the longer ones. Caddies' day is, of course, Monday, when the doctors and the judges stay at work and the caddies have the pool and golf course to themselves. On this particular Monday, ". . . Bruce Ransome came up / from the bottom of the pool / like a negative rising in a tank, / his body clear, dead, abstract."

A striking experience, but Matthews is not interested in the boy he was then; that would be mere nostalgia. Instead, he uses this memory as the basis for a sustained and moving meditation. Just before the lines I am going to quote, the speaker has compared himself, in his greenness, to the "dying elephant in the Babar / book," who is himself "like a character in a story / whom the author had made unlucky." It is with a contrast to the word *unlucky* that Matthews begins to end the poem:

The lucky stand in a green stupor
 like a beautiful forest. And
 their gossip is about how the lucky
 link arms, and the living, how the surface
 bears us up from Monday to Monday
 like a story about persistence,
 so that the long work of memory

goes on, its boredom and its courage
 and its theology of luck, which
 is finally a contest that luck wins.
 Do you want my premature stroke?
 Do I want your retarded child?
 Do you want Bruce Ransome green
 in your drowsing arms you can't link
 anymore with mine, they're so full
 of death-rinsed Bruce, or do you want
 to lay him down forever,
 one long Monday to the next
 and to the next one after that,
 and let the long week adhere
 to your fingers like grime, like matter's
 fingerprints, like manual labor,
 like an entire life's work?

The rhetorical pattern of the poem corners the reader behind an unanswerable question, trapped by this enforced handling of death's body. In a poem only a few pages before this one, it had been asserted that *lucky* and *unlucky* are the same thing; the proposition seems adequately proven here.

Matthews uses his past work to advantage in this book, where the casual beginning of so many of the poems lulls the reader into thinking that this is going to be like something seen before. Then a web of words and logical distinctions drops from the limbs of a tree, and suddenly there is sticky stuff everywhere—in your ears, in your eyes, swaddling each cell of your brain. Chatty poems thus turn learned, meditative, allusive, thoughtful. Matthews may well be the wisest poet of his generation—certainly he is the one who wishes to sound the wisest—and *Foreseeable Futures* may well be his deepest book.

III

David Young is a professor of literature who specializes in the English Renaissance and writes scholarly books about Shakespeare. He is also a critic of contemporary poetry, an editor of *Field* magazine, and a poet. In *Foraging*, his fifth book of poems, he seems to reflect this professional schizophrenia through the two very different styles in which he chooses to write. One side of him seems to want to speak with the wonderful linguistic abandon of the Elizabethan poets, while the other side seems to want to tell the events of a day or a place as a shoe salesman might.

Poems of the latter type are slightly more numerous; their very titles indicate the approach being taken—"In My Own Back Yard," "Two Trips to Ireland," "Mesa Verde," "Hunting for Mushrooms," and "Vermont Summer" all recount, with palpable sincerity, aspects of landscapes visited by the poet and adventures he apparently had there. In these poems Young generally adopts the persona of a semibumbler. "Vermont Summer," for example, has four sections. In the first, subtitled "Imaginary Polaroid," the speaker is

"standing in a meadow, / holding a list of fifty-one wildflowers. / . . . I am, as usual, lost"; he is also unable to recognize any of the listed flowers, nor remember them for more than a few seconds. Soon, "The dark comes on" and "the Milky Way spreads like an anchor overhead."

In the second section, Young describes Robert Frost's Ripton home (the one near Bread Loaf), then in section three he describes how a group of students, coming upon several bales of hay, "erected a midget Stonehenge in the moonlight." As was the case with the poet and his list of wildflowers, this is another attempt to generate the light of understanding within surrounding darkness; when "The sun goes down beyond Hay-Henge; / clouds and mountains mix in the distance." Besides the invocation of light, Young's search for understanding within the muddle of existence has another method: "Off and on I've been pondering models; / I think they are all we have."

In the final section, subtitled "Letter to Chloe," Young stumbles towards an answer:

Since you left, we've had
wild blackberries, northern lights,
and one grand thunderstorm.
Again, these mountains have been
Chinese with their graduated mist.
Tonight it's clear and we hope to see
a meteor shower. I'm teaching Vaughan,
who tried to show us another world
with images of light, and knew
he needed dark to make the light more real.

I shake my head, still lost.
I'm lucky if I find a berry,
name a flower, see a shooting star.
You and I cried a little at the airport:
each parting's a model for something bigger.
But I don't think the models mean much.
We try to take them as they come:
a trefoil in the hand, a meteor trail
crossing the retina, a black and glinting
tart-sweet berry in the mouth.

The poem attains meaning through the accumulation of significant details, images that relate to human clumsiness and celestial wonder. Stylistically, these lines may not be as plain as they could be, but they certainly come close; chatty and straightforward, they hunger for a sense of truth.

In his Elizabethan poems, Young reaches for much more complicated linguistic effects at the same time as he chronicles everyday scenes, events, and feelings. In the five sections of "October Couplets," for example, he talks about autumn in terms like these:

Again the cold: shot bolt, blue shackle,
oxalic acid bleaching a rubber cuff,

a cow-eyed giantess burning roots and brush,
 the streak and smash of clouds, loud settling jays,
 crows roosting closer—my older-by-one-year bones
 have their own dull hum, a blues: it's all plod,
 but they want to go on, above timberline,
 to boulders, florets, ozone, then go free
 in the old mill that the wind and the frost run
 all day all night under the gauze and gaze of stars.

The lines flex their muscles through a surfeit of image and rhetorical flow, albeit without embodying a whole lot of substance: though fall has arrived and winter is coming on, the speaker's bones still want to roam, just as Frost's heart did in his great and too-little-known poem, "Reluctance."

The third section is equally good, though on a rather different theme:

"Steam of consciousness," a student's fluke,
 makes me see a lake, linen-white at evening,
 some amnesia-happy poet all curled up
 sucking a rock at its black bottom;
 oblivion tempts everyone, but I
 would miss too much—whales and ticks,
 the weather's subtle bustle, blue crab clouds,
 my kite rising, paper and sticks, a silver ember,
 while the poem's ghost waits by the empty band shell,
 does a little tango, taps out its own last line.

Young basically follows his nose through these lines; "steam of consciousness" leads to amnesia which leads in turn to oblivion and death, which are rejected. Again the imagery is thoroughly engaging, the rhetoric and rhythm seductive.

However, the poem has not progressed much since the first section; rather, Young seems to be giving parallel responses to the general topic of the season. Sections two and four do the same thing, and section five—which features a dream about mutability, along with imagery of leaves as "paper cutouts drifting the yard, / stars, fish, mittens, saddles: the badges and epaulets // of emptiness"—concludes the poem with these lines and this thought: "I wake and shave, // still full of my dreamflood—oh skim milk sky, / oh brown star curling in my hand . . ." The speaker again feels keenly the autumnal passage of time and compares it with the world of dream he cannot retain.

Back in the Renaissance, such apologists for poetry as Sir Philip Sidney extolled a matched pair of virtues: delight (let us say style) and instruction (let us say content). Of delight this poem offers an abundance, through verbal density, rhythmic dexterity, and supple imagery. In the area of instruction, however, it offers far less. What Young does in most of his poems, no matter

which style he is favoring at the moment, is not so much to deliver either truth or wisdom as to respond to a setting and a situation. As he says at the beginning of "The Self: A Sonnet Sequence," "If we are what we see, hear, handle, / then I am London now." The assumption made in that line is a statement of poetic purpose for David Young; his poems do tend to become what they describe: settings, objects (alone and in combination), and events are rendered with total believability. What we are left with at the end is an impression of style and thing, but not an impression of content or meaning. For that we must stick with the truth-tellers and liars.

A better balance between the fancy and the plain is achieved in the work of Sharon Olds, thanks to a use of figuration that greatly enhances the surface plainness of her style. Late in his life, W. B. Yeats advised writers to be, above all, direct and clear. As with most situations, many are called and few are chosen; in effect, Charlie Smith and William Matthews are confessing their failure to live up to this standard when they admit to being liars. As Matthews says, though you may "knit languid and urgent sentences as readily / as you eat or pee," "Much goes unsaid. *Because . . .* the world can be / so dense with meaning . . . / that one grows dense as well." Somehow Sharon Olds is able to write with clarity and directness at the same time that she creates engrossing similes and metaphors, and that is the miracle of her poems.

The Gold Cell is her third book and resembles both *Satan Says* and *The Dead and the Living* in structure and content. The first section here looks outward to memorialize, essentially, victims of repressive societies. It is a sort of indirect paradigm for the second section, which deals with the speaker's childhood family and the various forms of abuse she suffered, as a similar kind of victim, there. The third section is largely about sex—the speaker's earliest experiences, episodes more recent, and in general. The fourth section is devoted to her own children, so much differently treated and raised than she was herself.

Because of their frank subject matter, it would be easy for one to think of these as confessional poems. But there is a crucial factor differentiating what Sharon Olds does from what Berryman, Lowell, Plath, and Sexton did. Their work was animated primarily by the ego, as though everything the self did, everything suffered, was so far out of the ordinary as to be remarkable. Sharon Olds, in contrast, views her experiences and feelings as ordinary; she turns her spotlight upon the shared fears and experiences of humanity. What may be more unusual, given the potent enemies that appear in these poems, is that every one of them is animated by the feeling of love, as is explained in "Little Things": "I am doing something I learned early to do, I am / paying attention to small beauties, / whatever I have—as if it were our duty to / find things to love, to bind ourselves to this world."

Among the things that are most beloved in this book are Liddy and Gabriel, the children who are central to section four. "The Green Shirt," about an injury to Gabriel, begins:

For a week after he breaks his elbow
 we don't think about giving him a bath,
 we think about bones twisted like white
 saplings in a tornado, tendons
 twined around each other like the snakes on the
 healer's caduceus.

Because it is her habit to speak the truth, clearly and directly, we might think of Olds's poems as being primarily literal in their movement and imagery. Not so. These lines achieve their heightened quality through the use of two carefully chosen figures of speech, almost hidden beneath the subject matter.

The whole poem, in fact, moves forward in this way. Soon we are introduced to the shirt of the title, which Gabriel wears

as if it were his skin, the alligator on it with
 wide jaws like the ones pain has
 clamped on his elbow, fine joint that
 used to be thin and elegant as
 something made with Tinkertoy, then it
 swelled to a hard black anvil,
 softened to a bruised yellow fruit . . .

We start with a simile, move to another, to a third, then leap quickly to two contrasting metaphors. After he has spent a week in his shirt, it is time to give this boy a bath, "So we . . . / slipped him into the tub . . . / . . . as you'd / help an old geezer across the street."

Next Olds describes the accident, its physical and emotional aftermath, and this time, because of the powerful emotions involved, the lines are literal:

. . . the smash, the screaming, the fear he had crushed his
 growth-joint, the fear as he lost all the
 feeling in two fingers, the blood
 pooled in ugly uneven streaks
 under the skin in his forearm and then he
 lost the use of the whole hand . . .

The clarity, the accuracy, of these lines sets the stage for a final metaphor and the emotional conclusion of the poem; as the parents hang over

. . . this duck sitting in the water with his L-shaped
 purple wing . . .
 Our eyes fill, we cannot look at each other,
 we watch him carefully and kindly soap the damaged arm,
 he was given to us perfect, we had sworn no harm
 would come to him.

Richard Hugo, a great American poet, once said that if you aren't willing to take the risk of sentimentality, you will never be any good as a poet. Olds certainly takes that risk here, and she emerges as the winner. The poem earns

its moment of feeling, its furtive tear, through all the good craft that has gone before, all those cunning similes and metaphors.

I keep harping on the use of figures of speech because this is what differentiates Olds's practice from that of such plainer stylists as Judith Kitchen and Jane Kenyon. Where they will build meaning in a poem from a single, carefully chosen image, something that is actually part of the scene or event being described, Olds will reach outside of the immediate situation for an illuminating analogue with which to animate her poem. Thus, though we always feel that she is telling the truth, like these other writers, she does not tell it plain. I want to give one final, whole, example of the way she uses figuration in her work. The book contains several strikingly literal poems about making love, which may be one reason "Topography" stands out:

After we flew across the country we
 got in bed, laid our bodies
 delicately together, like maps laid
 face to face, East to West, my
 San Francisco against your New York, your
 Fire Island against my Sonoma, my
 New Orleans deep in your Texas, your Idaho
 bright on my Great Lakes, my Kansas
 burning against your Kansas your Kansas
 burning against my Kansas, your Eastern
 Standard Time pressing into my
 Pacific Time, my Mountain Time
 beating against your Central Time, your
 sun rising swiftly from the right my
 sun rising swiftly from the left your
 moon rising slowly from the left my
 moon rising slowly from the right until
 all four bodies of the sky
 burn above us, sealing us together,
 all our cities twin cities,
 all our states united, one
 nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

What we have here is not the straightforward rhetorical flow another writer might have given us. Through a series of swirling repetitions and variations, Olds indicates the ebbs and floods of passion, the uneven way time passes at moments of intense pleasure.

While the poems I have quoted are relatively tame, Olds's subject matter is sometimes so extreme that the reader must inevitably question her sincerity, her truthfulness. She claims to have had an alcoholic father who is described metaphorically as eating his children and spitting out their bones; in later poems they make their peace. She claims to have had a mother who did something to her in bed once that she certainly did not like; again, in later poems they make their peace. She tells us that, at eighteen, she was in love with a young man who was then killed in a car wreck; she heard the news on the

radio and has never come to peace. Despite all of this, the only time one feels she is choosing a sensational subject matter is in the first section, where the political subjects do not seem to come to her (as the more intimate topics of other poems appear to); she goes to them. What makes the personal poems seem sensational is the clarity and directness of Olds's style, which imprints them so forcefully upon the reader's consciousness. This quality is yet one more testament to the craft of these poems, which are simultaneously and uniquely fancy and truthful.



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